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BECOMING OUR OWN GUINEA PIGS. A PROGRESS REPORT.

Presented by Joseph Felser, PhD

Dr. Joe Felser has been on the faculty at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY) in Brooklyn for the past fifteen years.

*As a philosopher, he has long been interested in the fundamental questions about human existence. He authored *The Way Back to Paradise: Restoring the Balance Between Magic and Reason (Hampton Roads, 2005)* and *The Myth of the Great Ending: Why We've Been Longing for the End of Days Since the Beginning of Time (Hampton Roads, 2011)*.*

Following is an edited and condensed version of Dr. Felser's presentation at the Professional Seminar, a progress report on his long-term study of Exceptional Human Experiences (EHEs), *Becoming Our Own Guinea Pigs*.

Prof. Felser states that The Monroe Institute (TMI) is a uniquely valuable venue for studying the links between experiences of wonder, intellectual wondering, and the potential for restoring the missing visionary base of philosophy and the culture at large. TMI is a safe laboratory for individual self-experimentation and self-inquiry, where one may indeed become one's own guinea pig.

TMI's audio technology has a proven track record for safely facilitating EHEs. The program process synthesizes the individualistic and communal aspects of EHE induction favored by the Greeks in schools such as the Eleusian Mysteries. The solitude of the CHEC unit is complemented by group work and opportunities for sharing ideas and experiences.

The distinctive "ethos" of the Institute is succinctly encapsulated in Bob's oft-repeated refrain: "Go check it out for yourself." This studious avoidance of indoctrination and dogma has an important precedent. No specific belief system was ever promulgated at Eleusis during its two-thousand-year run. The initiates returned to their respective homelands and remained faithful to their native religious practices.

These factors make TMI an ideal venue for studying the synergy between the two aspects of wonder. What kinds of philosophical questions lead individuals to come to TMI? What types of EHEs do they have here, and what meaning do they take away from their experiences? How might that meaning change over time? What further kinds of experiences do they have or seek as a result? And how do their individual trajectories affect others around them and perhaps even the culture at large? How do they enact these changing meanings in the world? These are the kinds of questions that I have been pursuing in my study.

The study thus follows a qualitative rather than quantitative methodological model. Qualitative research seeks to articulate the subject's own sense of his or her experience in all its lived immediacy, rather than to impose upon that experience some ideal scheme or theory that aims to explain it—or explain it away.

The qualitative researcher:

- 1) Focuses on gathering information pertaining to the research participant's subjective (first-person) experiences.
- 2) Seeks data that is rich in contextual detail—such as the participant's emotional experience, relationships with others, personal mythology, etc.
- 3) Is not concerned with trying to achieve absolute objectivity through controlled experiments.
- 4) Takes note of the words, metaphors, symbols, memes, etc., used by the participant and uses them to uncover the deeper meaning that the participant's experiences have for her or him.
- 5) May not know in advance what he or she is looking for (i.e., there is no specific hypothesis being tested) or how the research will unfold but, instead, allows the research design to shift according to the data and/or circumstances that arise. The study has indeed evolved with some modifications along the way, including a widening of the pool of potential participants, as well as modifications to the recruiting materials and the follow-up surveys.
- 6) Aims to make the study's findings public via a published report.
- 7) Strives to achieve the highest level of ethical rigor with respect to the welfare and rights of research participants. In addition to obtaining approval from both my college and the Institute's IRB (Institutional Review Board) committees, I also had to take and pass an online course on the ethics of human research in order to become certified by the City University of New York as a principal investigator.

The basic set-up of the study was as follows:

On the final day of their TMI program, graduates received a flyer describing the study and inviting their participation. This included the direct link to the consent form on my web site. There was a follow-up email, sent via Constant Contact, several weeks later, which also had the direct link to my web site. From there, participants were directed to the Phase 1 Survey, which included general instructions and ten demographic questions, which they could elect to answer in whole, in part, or not at all; and they were asked to indicate whether they wished to be eligible for inclusion in the Phase 2 Survey, which I would send via email three months following their initial response.

Here are the six Phase 1 Survey questions:

- 1) How would you describe yourself as a person? What is your sense of self—of who and what you are?

- 2) What kinds of questions have been most important to you in your life? How have you addressed them?
- 3) Why did you decide to attend a program at The Monroe Institute (TMI)?
- 4) Describe the highlights of your experience at TMI. What episodes, interactions, or features of the program had the greatest impact on you?
- 5) How did your TMI experience affect your sense of self? Where do think this might lead?
- 6) What effect(s) has your TMI experience had on your main life-questions, or on the answers you may have obtained or sought in the past? How might this change?

Three months following their submission, those selected to participate in Phase 2 received, via email, a second consent form; a survey identical to the Phase 1 version; a set of specific follow-up questions based on their Phase 1 responses; and instructions for completing and returning the forms. The inclusion of the Phase 1 questionnaire was to allow participants to revise or add to their initial responses on their own accord. Participants could indicate their desire to participate in Phase 3.

Six months following their Phase 2 submission, selected participants were invited to participate in Phase 3. Initially, they receive an email from me containing a third consent form and what were projected as the initial questions in an ongoing, back-and-forth interview/dialogue that would be carried forward via email as long as there were questions remaining and the participant was willing to respond.

This chart tallies the number of responses since the study's inception (June2011):

- Total number of participants submitting consent form for Phase 1: 68
- Total number of participants completing survey for Phase 1: 42
- Total number of Phase 2 surveys sent: 30; Responses received: 14
- Total number of Phase 3 invitations: 11; Responses received: 10

All of the participants who completed surveys for Phases 1 and 2 provided some portion of the requested demographic data.

I have recently been conducting a systematic study of the data as a whole, in which I look for patterns reflective of the unity or commonality of experiences, as well as the diversity, divergence, and uniqueness of individual responses.

Here are a few very preliminary impressions, to whet your appetite.

Could it be that the induction of wonder and its concomitants of delight, joy, rapture, and even ecstasy might be the primary purpose or driving force behind the EHE? If so, some of our most cherished notions of spiritual "evolution" and philosophical "progress" may be questioned, insofar as they have assumed the meaning of life to be achievement and work, with values

such as play, humor, and joy being secondary. As one of my participants put it, “When you abandon the need to determine if something is or is not true, you are free to entertain any possibility.” And this, she added, brings with it an exhilarating sense of “fun” as she contacts others and they share their own experiences and thoughts, no matter how “far out.”

Comments like these reminded me of the late, great mythologist Joseph Campbell’s suggestion that what we’re all really seeking is not an intellectual meaning for life, but rather a direct “experience of being alive,” in which our everyday personality makes direct contact with the deep source of our existence, “so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”

The second impression is a finding that surprised me. A number of individuals reported that their greatest experience of wonder at TMI was not a spectacular OBE, NDE, or other type of otherworldly journey, but rather, what might be dubbed an “in-the-body experience” or IBE. These participants insisted that they had had no difficulty in the past (sometimes as far back as early childhood) inducing OBEs or other non-ordinary states of consciousness, and accepted them as a natural part of human existence. However, they indicated that they had never really felt completely at home in their physical bodies and that their previous non-ordinary-state activity was to some extent an escape from what they perceived as an unpleasant daily life. The transformation that occurred in the IBE was a sudden and often shocking embrace of physicality, relationship, and its emotional vulnerabilities; the bittersweet pains and pleasures of embodied life; and the vital connection to the earth.

One such participant wrote:

“In Guidelines, I got the message that while going out of body was all well and good... I was missing an important point: that I’m in a body and I should take advantage of the experience because there might come a day when I’d regret not participating more in the Earth Life System...”

And another:

“I seem to explore deeply the notion of soul, full potential, and how to bring that potential here. Not through working my way out of karma or conditioning like I had been doing so far, but by directly connecting to soul and burning my way back into the body. Bringing it to manifestation. Like building a clear bridge. And I can also see how that has to happen at the same time as grounding and getting deeper into the materiality of this world.”

Now this kind of comment strikes me as a peculiarly interesting, and potentially very fruitful, development at this particular historical juncture.

In 1932, Carl Jung stated that our greatest challenge would be to give the reality of both consciousness and matter their equal due and to “reconcile ourselves with the mysterious truth

that the spirit is the living body seen from within, and the body the outer manifestation of the living spirit—the two being really one.”

Similarly, James Hillman has noted that the ancient shamanic image of the soul’s descent or “growing down” into the world became eclipsed by the ascension model favored by Greek and biblical thinking, and also by our modern economic and psychological perspectives, in which “up” equals good, and “down” equals bad. We want to grow up; be up; experience an upward trend or uptick; climb up the ladder of success; etc. However, as Hillman observes, “even the tallest trees send down roots as they rise toward the light.” On this much older view, we need a deeper sense of rootedness to counterbalance, and at the same time strengthen, our higher spiritual aspirations—to burn our way back into the body, as my participant so eloquently put it.

Perhaps these IBERs are a philosophical vanguard that will lead us in a more fruitful direction—full circle. And just here a stiff dose of humility may be in order. As Dr. Stanislav Grof, the Czech-American psychiatric researcher, has observed, we may “have to admit that the basic philosophy of the Western scientific worldview is seriously wrong and that in many ways shamans from illiterate cultures and ancient cultures have had a more adequate understanding of reality than we do.”

Or, as Socrates declared, true “wisdom” means recognizing one’s own ignorance.

Well, so be it.

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